



YOU BEAUTIES: NEW AUSTRALIAN CINEMA

Friends and Strangers

James Vaughan's remarkable debut feature is on its surface an indie mumblecore-influenced comedy about intertwined young lives, set between Sydney and Brisbane. But its simplicity is deceptive, and it subtly twists into something altogether stranger, and more politically subversive.

Vaughan plays on an established Antipodean penchant for postcolonial Gothic – exemplified by Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) – that portrays the landscape as unknowable and treacherous. It becomes a source of unease and even vertigo to the white settlers who have claimed false sovereignty over it by the violent erasure of Indigenous cultures, so can find no peaceful sense of home. *Friends and Strangers* is ultimately a film about how we read a place, and the ways in which a shaky colonial illusion of power has been encoded in it.

'Your memory is like a big mansion with all these different doors, and when you lock off whole sections, that's when things start to get real freaky,' a friend advises Ray (Fergus Wilson), a directionless twentysomething who can't move past a former break-up. He may just as well be referring to official settler history, and the disenfranchisement of Aboriginal peoples, which is a taboo subject and haunts that history's margins.

A closing title informs us that *Friends and Strangers* was filmed on the lands of the Eora and Ngunnawal peoples. In all that comes before, they are notable only by their absence. The opening credits are accompanied by watercolours of landscapes and nature by William Bradley, an 18th-century naval officer and cartographer who was in the First Fleet that took convicts to Australia, leading us into a place defined by its affluent white protagonists through the lens of settler definitions and representations.

'What about the Aborigines, are they around here or what?' an American tourist asks at the close of a tour conducted by a guide who has waxed lyrical on housing once owned by the shipping industry, but has seemingly stayed silent on the tens of thousands of years of culture in Australia prior to the arrival of the British. The guide has already been distracted, and the question goes unanswered.

In the first section of the film, Ray has bumped into Alice (Emma Diaz), an acquaintance who works as a corporate tax regulator (the corrupt hold of global finance in Australia is a running theme). He accompanies her home to Sydney, via a camping trip; but sexual tension and emotional baggage destroy any hope of a carefree getaway. Absorbed in their drama, the pair never see the ancient drawings nearby. Those are patronisingly referred to as 'Aboriginal doodles' by a white local more concerned with whether they have permission to set up their tent on a lawn.

Unnerving details fly by, further unremarked, which point to parallel lives operating outside the film's frame. 'Did you see that woman giving birth on the side of the road?' Alice asks. Nods to the Crown are everywhere: royal mugs, Queen emblazoned currency, and, in the Royal Botanical Gardens with its imported plants, a statue of the first governor of New South Wales, Captain Arthur Phillip, towering above bronze plaques of unnamed Aboriginal people. There is the ubiquitous litter, too, of a land despoiled, and 'a giant pile of shit in the street', from Anzac Day parade police horses.

Events take a delirious turn and the offbeat humour amps up as Ray visits the home of a potential client for a meeting about shooting his first wedding video, in a former artists' street now inhabited by financiers. Horror elements build as the friend who hooked him up with the job succumbs to nausea, and foreboding ambient music emanates from the house of a hostile neighbour embroiled in a legal construction dispute. Ray is given a tour of the cellar and its artworks, 'all the freaky ones we just can't hang upstairs' – including a portrait of a figure in a KKK hood.

The fragmentary narrative, with its jarring shifts, suggests a world barely staying coherent and intelligible, and as we watch the colour change in a painting of the Queen (a shift denied by the homeowner) the credibility of this entire filmic world is called into doubt. Cinema is an art of illusion, which can help dark histories remain hidden. Vaughan is wise to this game, and rather than play along, is eager to reveal its mechanisms.

Carmen Gray, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2021-22

Director's Statement

A comedic, non-linear, cultural exploration with an oblique take on realism—in *Friends and Strangers* I wanted to probe the intellectual ennui in Australia's upper middle-class and draw a line from there to Australian society at large. There's both an inherent comedy and quiet horror to the petty, pestering tasks and tepid struggles for social validation that seem to dominate life in Sydney's comfortable inner suburbs. Shrivelled by a narcissistic, homogenous corporate culture, eroded civic connectivity and the endless, enervating pursuit of short-term, insecure work, so many individuals are lost in a desert of meaningless choices while the important questions about our genocidal origins and the future we imagine for our society and our world is always work for another day. Though rooted in this Australian context, much has been taken from Kafka's winding tales of bewildered individuals searching within and against haunted and centreless social systems.

There is a lot of myself in this film and I have great affection for the main character. Facing a fraught choice between a comfortable submission to hollow materialism and a lonely, precarious investigation into (possibly doomed) alternatives, I feel a natural response is a kind of paralysis – to delay making any choice at all. Ray means well, but he always seems to think too much or not enough, and though he exists in the present his mind always seems to be somewhere else, in memory and speculation but never anywhere in particular. I don't think this is so unusual, we are all haunted by our pasts, just as we in the present are the ghosts haunting our future selves. Working with a largely non-professional cast was a means to access these drifting mental states in a direct and unembellished manner.

I wanted the film to turn slowly through its duration, as if on a wheel, from whimsy to dread, subjective to objective, past to present. Steady locked-off compositions frame characters as solipsistic voyagers in a complex and confusing world; strange encounters spiral outward with an undulating rhythm – situations rise uncannily from banal misunderstandings to absurdist farce, only to be contrasted with sparse zones that elasticise and disturb a sense of reliable perspective. *Friends and Strangers* is a kind of jaunt, delighting in the topographies of our cultural surfaces just as it attempts to peel the layers back.

Production notes

Lime Parfait

Dani paints her Nanna's pergola on a hot Melbourne day, in this charming exploration of memory and inter-generational relationships.

YOU BEAUTIES: NEW AUSTRALIAN CINEMA

So-Called Australia: Blak Art on Film + Terror Nullius

Fri 3 Feb 18:10; Tue 21 Feb 20:30

Sissy + Pink Reef

Sat 11 Feb 20:30; Mon 20 Feb 17:50

Friends and Stranger + Lime Parfait

Thu 16 Feb 18:10; Fri 24 Feb 18:15

You Won't Be Alone + Gem

Fri 17 Feb 20:25; Sat 25 Feb 17:30

Shadow + Call History

Wed 22 Feb 18:20

Sweet As + Finding Jedda

Sun 26 Feb 18:30; Mon 27 Feb 20:50

With thanks to



IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

BFI Future Film Festival

16-19 Feb

Preview: Subject + Q&A with director Camilla Hall and contributor

Margaret Ratliff

Fri 17 Feb 18:10

Preview: The Strays + Q&A

Mon 20 Feb 18:15

Preview: Suzume + Q&A with Makoto Shinkai

Wed 1 Mar 18:00

Doctor Who: The Sea Devils + Q&A with Katy Manning

Sat 4 Mar 12:00

Glasgow Film Festival Preview: How to Blow Up a Pipeline

Sun 5 Mar 19:50

TV Preview: Inside No. 9 + Q&A with Steve Pemberton, Reece

Shearsmith and Adam Tandy

Mon 6 Mar 18:15

WOW Festival Presents Prima Facie + panel discussion

Wed 8 Mar 18:15

Preview: Winners + Q&A with director Hassan Nazer

Thu 9 Mar 18:15

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 13 Mar 18:30

NEW RELEASES

Enys Men

Continues from Fri 13 Jan

EO

From Fri 3 Feb

Blue Jean

From Fri 10 Feb; Fri 10 Feb 18:10 (+ Q&A with director-screenwriter

Georgia Oakley and producer H el ene Sifre)

Creature

From Fri 24 Feb; Fri 24 Feb 18:10 (+ intro and Q&A with director Asif

Kapadia and other members of the filmmaking team)

Broker

From Fri 24 Feb

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seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events.

Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the

sun goes down.

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Projecting the Archive: I'll Get You for This (aka Lucky Nick Cain) +

intro by Rosie Taylor, Curatorial Archivist, BFI National Archive

Tue 21 Feb 18:20

Experimenta: Right of Way + Q&A with artists Dan Guthrie, Ufuoma

Essi and Arjuna Neuman, hosted by Jonathan Ali Thu 23 Feb 18:10

Film Wallahs: Kekee Manzil: House of Art Fri 24 Feb 20:40

Course: Filmmaking for Artists: Beginners Filmmaking Workshop

Sun 26 Feb 10:30-16:30

Relaxed Screening: Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-j ) +

intro and discussion Mon 27 Feb 18:15

Experimenta: Machinima: UNICA and other films from the computer

graphics world + Q&A with Blaise (formerly Anja) Kirschner

Wed 1 Mar 18:10

Member Picks: The War of the Roses Thu 2 Mar 18:15

Course: Filmmaking for Artists: Intermediate Filmmaking Workshop

Sun 5 Mar 10:30-16:30 (1 session)

Silent Cinema: The Passion of Joan of Arc

(La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc) Sun 5 Mar 14:00

Member Salon: Close Mon 6 Mar 20:15

Seniors: The Teckman Mystery (+ intro) + The Stranger Left No Card

Wed 8 Mar 14:00

African Odysseys: On Her Shoulders:

Black Women in Broadcast Journalism Wed 8 Mar 18:10

Woman with a Movie Camera: Fashion Reimagined + Q&A with

director Becky Hutner and designer Amy Powney Wed 8 Mar 20:40

Member Exclusive: BFI Southbank and BFI IMAX Tour

Mon 13 Mar 10:00

Art in the Making: Art We Deserve? (+ intro by Ken Worpole) +

Marketing the Arts: Foundation for Success Mon 13 Mar 18:15

Projecting the Archive: The Clairvoyant + intro by Dr Lucie Bea

Dutton, historian Tue 14 Mar 18:10

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